A

SKETCH OF THE LIFE

AND SOME OF THE WORKS OF

JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY, R.A.

PREPARED FOR THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BY

AUGUSTUS THORNDIKE PERKINS.

CAMBRIDGE:
PRESS OF JOHN WILSON AND SON.
1873.

SKETCH.

JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY was the son of Richard Copley and Mary Singleton, his wife; both of whom are thought to have emigrated to Boston from Limerick, in Ireland. The Copley family, of Yorkshire, has long been seated in that county; and it is supposed that Richard Copley was a descendant of some member who emigrated to Ireland. The present representative of the Yorkshire family is Sir Joseph William Copley, Baronet. The Singletons, from whom came Mrs. Copley, according to Burke,* are a family of importance and station in county Clare, descended from the Singletons, of Lancashire. Mrs. Copley was the younger daughter of John Singleton, Esq., the great-grandfather of the present John Singleton, Esq., of Quinville Abbey, county Clare.

All who write at the present time on subjects like the one before us should and do receive family traditions with extreme caution, although it is often useful to record them.

The story current in the Copley family is, that Mr. Richard Copley, although endowed with a good name and a handsome person, was not rich. Squire Singleton perhaps could not, and certainly did not, so largely endow his daughter, as to allow her husband and herself to continue to reside in county Clare, in the style to which she at least had been accustomed.

The young people, therefore, very wisely determined to seek a new home in America, where they could permit themselves more freedom from family influences and restraint.

The result was, that they not only sought, but found, in this country, a very fair amount of worldly prosperity, which has been continued in a remarkable manner to their numerous descendants.

John Singleton Copley, R. A., was born in Boston, July 3, 1737. By the records of Trinity Church, it appears that his mother, Mrs. Mary Singleton, widow of Richard Copley, mar-

* See Burke's Landed Gentry, 4th ed. p. 1379.

ried Peter Pelham, May 22, 1748, when her son, John Singleton, was nearly eleven years of age.

Mr. Pelham was a widower, and had by his first wife three sons, Peter, Charles, and William; by his second wife he had but one son, Henry, whose portrait as the "Boy with the Squirrel" is in the possession of his great-niece, Mrs. James Sullivan Amory.

The marriage of Copley's mother to Mr. Pelham was probably of the utmost advantage to the future artist. Besides being a man of unusually good education for the times, — a land surveyor and a mathematician, — Mr. Pelham was certainly a passable painter of portraits, and a mezzotint engraver of more than ordinary merit. He preceded Smibert the painter, and Harrison the architect, who came to this country in the train of Bishop Berkeley, by at least three years. Whitmore, — always most excellent authority on such points, — speaking of him in connection with his painting and engraving, says, "He was the founder, indeed, of these arts in New England."

Mr. Pelham painted portraits of the Rev. Cotton Mather, the Rev. John Moorhead, the Rev. Timothy Cutler, and the Rev. Matthew Byles. He also engraved these four portraits, placing upon each the inscription of "pinxit," as well as "fecit," or "excudit."

Besides these, Pelham engraved a portrait of the Rev. Benjamin Coleman, in 1734, taken from a picture by Smibert; also one, in 1743, of the Rev. William Cooper; in 1747, one of Governor Shirley, one of the Rev. Joseph Sewall; and, in 1750, one of the Rev. Thomas Prince.

The original picture of Rev. Cotton Mather is now in the American Antiquarian Society's rooms at Worcester. A portrait of Deacon Barnard, of Mather's church, dated in 1728, was exhibited in Boston last year, and may be ascribed confidently to Pelham. It is owned by Dr. J. B. S. Jackson, of Boston.

There are some reasons for thinking that Pelham was the instructor of several of the engravers who succeeded him. He most probably taught his step-son, Copley, the rudiments of his art, whilst his example must have been of timely service in fostering such tastes as the child may have shown. The household of Peter Pelham was, perhaps, the only place in New England where painting and engraving were the predominant pursuits.

In this family Copley lived from his eleventh to his fourteenth year, and became greatly attached to his new relatives.

It is a well-founded tradition that he was as quiet and studious in his boyhood as he was conscientious and painstaking in his later years.

His letters show that he had been carefully educated in his early youth, — a lack of which advantage can be with difficulty concealed in middle age. He knew enough of Mythology to paint, when quite young, two allegorical pictures, in which the arrangement of the figures prove that he had considerable familiarity with that subject.

When Copley was about fifteen years of age, he painted a portrait of his step-brother, Charles Pelham. This picture is now in the possession of Charles Pelham Curtis, a great-grandson, and shows some promise of what it was possible for Copley to accomplish in after years. The background of the picture is out of drawing; but the figure, although stiff, is not badly rendered.

That he advanced rapidly in his art, appears from the fact that, when he was sixteen years old, he published an engraving of the Rev. William Welsteed, from a painting which he made himself.

The inscription on this engraving is: "Rev. William Welsteed, of Boston, New England, æt. 58. 1753; J. S. Copley pinxit et fecit." As this engraving was published soon after the death of Mr. Pelham, — which occurred in 1751, — it may be fairly inferred that it was commenced under his supervision, and advanced to a certain point under his instruction. In the same year he painted a portrait, which is signed J. S. Copley, and dated 1753, of Dr. De Mountfort, then a child. This very interesting picture is well drawn and quite good in color, and is owned by Mrs. C. D. Farlean, of Detroit, Mich.

In 1754 was painted the allegorical picture of Mars, Venus, and Vulcan. This picture is thirty inches long by twenty-five wide: Vulcan, with his anvil and forge, seems engaged in making darts; one of which Venus throws at Mars, who is approaching. The picture is signed and dated, 1754, and is in the possession of Mrs. H. B. Chapman, of Bridgewater, Mass.

In 1755, Major George Washington, late aide-de-camp to General Braddock, visited Boston for the sake of relating to Governor Shirley the circumstances attending the death of that gentleman's gallant son, at the fatal battle of Monongahela.* It was then well known that the courage and expe-

* "Colonel Washington left Alexandria, on his journey to Boston, Feb. 4th. . . . He returned on the 23d of March. . . . He was well received and much noticed by General Shirley, with whom he continued ten days, mixing constantly in the society of the town. . . . He also visited Castle William, and other objects worthy of a stranger's notice." — *Sparks's Washington*, vol. ii. p. 132.

rience of Major Washington, and the steadfastness of the Colonial troops, had saved the remnant of the British army on that day; and the young Virginian was, naturally, the observed of all observers. Mr. Copley painted his portrait in miniature; which, after remaining in the Washington family for many years, came into the possession of Washington Irving, and from him to Mr. George P. Putnam, of New York, the well-known publisher.

In 1756, he painted a three-fourths length portrait of General William Brattle, life-size, which, although somewhat hard, shows a decided advance in manner. This picture is signed and dated, and is owned by Mr. William Sumner Appleton, of Boston.

In 1758, Copley drew in crayon a fine head of Hugh Hall, which is signed with a monogram and dated. It is in possession of his great-granddaughter, Miss Borey.

From this period he improved rapidly; and in 1762 he painted exceedingly well. In 1763, he drew in crayon a portrait of the beautiful Rebecca Gardiner, afterwards the wife of Captain Philip Dumaresq, of the British army. This portrait, although somewhat injured by an accident, manifests quite an improvement in ease and grace. About 1766, he painted a portrait of Mrs. Edmund Perkins, the great-great-grandmother of this writer, wherein he displayed his extraordinary powers in the delineation of old age. The countenance is remarkable for the thoughtful charm of its expression, wonderfully rendered, and its fine intellectual character, time as yet not having destroyed the original regularity of the features, which in youth are said to have been of very great beauty. This picture is in the possession of Daniel Shillaber, of Brighton.

In 1767, he painted a fine picture, which is signed in monogram and dated, of Rebecca Boylston, who was the second wife of Governor Gill. In 1768, Mr. C. W. Peale, afterwards a well-known artist, entered his atelier as a student.

In 1769, he painted those two most beautiful pictures of Colonel and Mrs. Lee, which are signed with a monogram and dated. In his later years, Mr. Copley frequently spoke of these pictures, declaring that, for the manner in which they were painted, he could not surpass them. They are in the possession of a grandson, — General William Raymond Lee.

At this time, 1769, Boston contained a population of about eighteen thousand souls. The Hancock mansion, the De Blois house, the residences of Faneuil, Vassal, Governor Bowdoin, Governor Hutchinson, and Sir Henry Frankland, all stately buildings, standing in extensive gardens, decorated the city.

The surrounding country was beautiful and well cultivated, and the fine harbor was ploughed by the cut-waters of numerous vessels from all parts of the world.

The houses of the gentry were ornamented with many very good portraits. There exist in Boston at the present time eleven portraits, painted by Smibert, of no little merit; while there are known to be at least eighteen by Blackburn, some of which are really excellent. Besides these, there were a considerable number of good pictures painted in England, that had found their way to this country by one accident or another, — such as the portrait of Governer Belcher, said to be painted by Sir Godfrey Kneller; that of Lord Stafford and Mr. Wentworth, said to be by Vandyck; Winthrop, by Vandyck; and a picture of one of the Dudleys, by Sir Godfrey Kneller. All these pictures Copley must have seen, since, says Dr. Gardiner, "his genial disposition and his courtly manners make him a welcome guest everywhere." We may easily believe that so careful a student did not pass such pictures by without thorough study, and from them gained much knowledge, both in drawing and in coloring.

Besides this, Boston was at that time the seat of a learned, refined, and cultivated society. Among the eminent divines were Dr. Holyoke, President of the University, Dr. Chauncy, and Dr. Cooper. Of great judges and lawyers were Chief-Justice Oliver, Judge Andrew Oliver, Judge Chambers Russell, Judge John Otis, Judge Marston, Judge Saltonstall, Councillor Dana, and Solicitor-General Quincy.

Among the distinguished women of the time were Mercy Otis Warren, the historian; the beautiful Mrs. Wentworth, Mrs. Barrel, Elizabeth De Blois, Mrs. Colonel John Murray, Anna and Rebecca Gardiner, Mrs. Barrett, Mrs. Henry Hill; Susan and Mary, the daughters of Richard Clarke; Mrs. Henshaw, Mrs. Inches, Mrs. Watson, Mary Turner, Dorothy Quincy, Lady Temple, Mrs. Sargent, Mrs. Amory, and Mrs. James Perkins, — all noted in their time for unusual attractions.

Of statesmen and politicians, there were Sir John Temple, Samuel Adams, Governor Hutchinson, John Hancock, Colonel Sparhawk, and Harrison Gray; while James Allen, Dr. Byles, and Joseph Green were men of excellent wit and most rare humor.

Of great merchants, there were Thomas Hancock, John Barrett, Colonel Watson, Josiah Quincy, Benjamin Greene, William Phillips, John Wendell, Richard Clarke, John Erving, Edward Payne, and Epes Sargent; and, finally, to show that

Copley, since his early youth, could not have been without sympathizers of his own turn of mind, we may mention, besides his step-father Mr. Pelham, a number of resident artists. John Smibert, who came to America from England with Bishop Berkeley, married Mary Williams, of Boston, and left four sons and a considerable property. He was known to be intimate with Mr. Pelham; and as Copley painted so early as 1752, it may be fairly inferred that he had every opportunity of studying the works of the older artist. There was Harrison, also, the architect who came over with Smibert, and designed the King's Chapel and the Episcopal Church at Cambridge. He went back to England to assist in the decoration of Blenheim Castle, but returned to Boston, married, and died here. There was Paul Revere, always a friend of Copley: when he returned from Fort Edward and resigned his commission as a Lieutenant of Artillery, he established himself as an engraver. He made an engraving on copper from a portrait of the Rev. Dr. Mayhew, and was celebrated for his political caricatures. He certainly designed almost all the solid wooden frames that surround Copley's pictures at the present time.

Nathaniel Hurd, whose portrait was painted by Copley, as was Revere's, was an excellent artist, and probably a pupil of Pelham. He engraved a miniature of the Rev. Dr. Sewall; and was exceedingly graceful in designing coats-of-arms and book-plates.

Nathaniel, son of John Smibert, gave promise of considerable abilities as a painter, but died young, in 1756.

John Greenwood, born in 1726, has left a very fair specimen of his skill, in a picture of John Cutler, in the possession of Mr. William Appleton. And, among the painters and engravers of lesser note, we may mention Richard Jennys, Jr., Thomas Johnson, Robert Turner, Francis Dewing, George Searle, and Francis Garden.

The last artist on the list is J. B. Blackburn; whose pictures, to a certain degree, Copley, ~~in~~ his early manner, imitated and surpassed. It would seem, from seeing the pictures of these painters side by side, that Copley must have studied with Blackburn. Both frequently used, either as the lining of a dress or as a drapery, a certain shade of mauve pink. Blackburn uses this shade feebly, while Copley dashes it on with the hand of a master. Some of Blackburn's drapery is as good as Copley's, particularly his white satins; but many of his heads, especially those of women, are feeble. This is never so with Copley. He may be hard and angular, but he

is almost always vigorous. The fine pictures of Joseph Allen and his wife, in the possession of Miss Andrews; and of the Cunningham family, in the possession of Mrs. Porter, show conclusively how good an artist Blackburn was.

On Nov. 16, 1769, when he was about thirty-two years of age, Copley married Susan, the daughter of Mr. Richard Clarke, a distinguished merchant of Boston. One of Mr. Clarke's sons was at that time Commissary-General of the British army in Boston; and a daughter, Mary, married Judge Samuel Barrett, LL.D.

In 1771, Colonel Trumbull relates that he visited Copley, in Boston, and found him living in a beautiful house, fronting on a fine open common. Trumbull, then a young man at Harvard College, seems to have been struck with the elegance of the artist's dress and appearance.

He describes him as attired in a crimson velvet suit, laced with gold, and as having every thing about him in very handsome style. Indeed, Copley writes about this time that, considering the size of the place, he is making a very comfortable income.

In 1772, Copley painted a fine picture of Eleazer Tyng, which is signed John Singleton Copley, Boston, 1772.

In 1773, says the late eminent conveyancer, Nathaniel Ingersoll Bowditch, "Copley owned all the land bounded on the west by the Charles River, thence by Beacon Street to Walnut Street, thence by Walnut Street to Mt. Vernon Street, thence by Mt. Vernon Street to Louisburg Square, thence by Louisburg Square to Pinckney Street, thence by Pinckney Street to the water; containing about eleven acres of land."

About this time Copley painted his picture of "The Boy with the Squirrel;" which he selected to send to England for exhibition at Somerset House. Benjamin West, to whom the picture was consigned, received and examined it. He knew it to be the work of an American artist, from the wood upon which it was stretched, and also from the fact that the flying squirrel belonged to New England. No letter came with this picture; but so excellent was it considered, that the rule that no picture without the artist's name could be exhibited was dispensed with. In consequence of the favor with which this picture was received, Copley was advised to go to England; and he quitted America in the early part of 1774, never to return.*

From England he crossed to the Continent, and studied

* John Singleton Copley sailed as a passenger from Boston with Captain Robson in 1774. *(Mr. James M. Robbins, M. H. S.)*

assiduously, — particularly at Parma and at Rome. He travelled in Italy as far south as Naples, and visited in company with his friends, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Izzard, of South Carolina, the wonderful temples of Pæstum, "which," as he says, "were antiquities in the time of Augustus Cæsar."

It was with difficulty that he was persuaded to take two portraits in Rome, so precious did he find every moment of his time.

In 1775, he travelled and studied in Germany, in Holland, and in France, and soon afterwards was joined in England by his family, consisting of his father-in-law, Mr. Richard Clarke (whose tea had so lately been mixed with the waters of Boston Harbor), his wife, his son John Singleton, afterwards Lord Chancellor Lyndhurst, his daughter Elizabeth, afterwards married to Gardiner Greene, of Boston, and his other daughter, Miss Mary Copley.* There was still another child, a boy, whose portrait is painted in the family picture, but who died an infant. Mr. Copley soon distinguished himself, and in 1777 he was made an Associate of the Academy.

Judge Curwen, writing from London in 1780, states that he saw in Mr. Copley's studio, finished, the Family picture, the Death of Lord Chatham, Watson and the Shark, and a portrait of Mrs. Hay.

The celebrated Elkanah Watson was in London in 1782. He had a full-length portrait of himself taken by Copley, for which he paid one hundred guineas. Mr. Watson, in his journal, thus speaks of the picture and of the artist: "The painting was finished in most exquisite style in every part except the background, which Copley and I designed to represent a ship, bearing to America the acknowledgments of our independence. The sun was just rising upon the stripes of the Union streaming from her gaff. All was complete save the flag, which Copley did not deem proper to hoist under the present circumstances, as his gallery was the constant resort of the Royal family and of the nobility. I dined with the artist on the glorious 5th of December, 1782. After listening with him to the speech of the King, formally recognizing the United States of America as in the rank of nations, previous to dinner, and immediately after our return from the House of Lords, he invited me into his studio; and there, with a bold hand, a master's touch, and I believe an American heart, he attached to the ship the stars and stripes. This was, I imagine, the first American flag hoisted in Old England."

---

* Mrs. John Singleton Copley and three children sailed in the "Minerva," Captain Calahan, from Marblehead for London, May 27, 1775. *(Mr. James M. Robbins, M. H. S.)*

In 1783, Copley was elected a Royal Academician, and was offered five hundred guineas to paint a family group of six persons.

From this period, Copley was borne along by the full tide of success. He purchased from Lord Fauconborg the mansion-house in George Street, long afterwards famous as the residence of the great Chancellor Lyndhurst.

He painted a portrait of Lord Mansfield, whose house was near his own. Mrs. Greene well remembered the burning of Lord Mansfield's residence, by the mob, during the riots incited by the enthusiast, Lord George Gordon.

He painted three of the children of George III., — a very graceful picture, now at Buckingham Palace. At the time that he painted the picture of Charles I. demanding the five members, for which a number of the gentlemen of Boston paid fifteen hundred pounds, Mrs. Greene recollects that she and her father were driven in a post-chaise over a considerable part of England, visiting every house in which there was a portrait of a member of the Long Parliament, and always received as honored guests.

It is said that every face in this great picture was taken from a portrait which, in Copley's time, was extant.

Besides his many graces of mind and person, John Singleton Copley was endowed to a remarkable degree with the great gift of sound common sense, and was enabled to impart his convictions to those seeking his advice in a manner that made them always acceptable.

Mr. Richard Frothingham, a member of the Massachusetts Historical Society, tells us, on the authority of the Hutchinson Papers, that this trait was evinced in a most notable manner at the time when the public mind in Boston was greatly excited in regard to the cargoes of tea which had lately arrived in that port.

Mr. Copley appeared before and addressed the town meeting at that time, making certain suggestions looking to a compromise on the subject, which were received with great attention and respect, and which tended, for a while at least, to allay the bitterness of party strife.

On the whole, Copley's life was one of great success. He had the advantage of the acquaintance of many of the most eminent men of his time, both in England and America.

In his domestic life he was unusually fortunate. His wife was a charming, cultivated woman; his son, one of the most distinguished men of the day; and his daughters, remarkable both for beauty and intelligence.

The author of these sketches had the pleasure, some years since, of conversing with Miss Mary Copley, — at that time a resident of Hampton Court Palace. This lady was a woman of remarkable intellect and force of character; the intimate friend and counsellor of her distinguished brother through his long and eventful life. Her familiarity with and interest in the politics of Europe and America was astonishing; and on the day of her death, at the age of ninety-four years, it is said she had read to her the leading article in the "Times," which treated of some political matter in which she was interested.

"I remember my father distinctly, in 1785," said Miss Copley. "Many fine gentlemen came to our house in George Street, and I have seen many since; but I do not remember ever to have observed one who surpassed my father in elegance of manner or in the dignity of his deportment." "He was fond of handsome things, exceedingly particular in his dress, and much given to hospitality; but his first pleasure was in painting, and his second was in reading the English classics, especially the poets." "His favorite book was Milton's 'Paradise Lost'; and he dearly loved flowers, which he painted beautifully." "In his disposition he was exceedingly generous and kindly; and he always praised and admired his brother artists, with whom he was ever on the most intimate terms."

Mr. Cutting, writing from London in 1788, says: "I have visited Mr. Copley, the famous historical painter. I was highly gratified while viewing his representation of the death of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham. It is a most excellent performance, and proves a fortunate one. If he sells it for the price he demands, and which I think will be readily obtained, the picture and the engraving of it now subscribed for will have produced about eleven thousand pounds. Mr. Copley gave me a rough sketch, a key to the painting."

This letter and the sketch are in the possession of Mr. W. G. Brooks, a member of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Copley was a stanch Churchman, and a man of strong religious feelings. This latter trait is shown by his treatment of the subjects of many of his later works, — such as his Adoration of the Magi, his Samuel and Eli, and Saul.

His last picture was on the subject of the Resurrection. His last portrait, says Dunlap, was the likeness of his son. It is possible, however, that Dunlap mistook a portrait that Copley made of himself, for the purpose of having it engraved, for one of his son, as there exists no picture that is known of Lord Lyndhurst taken by his father at that time. This last portrait was burned in the great fire of 1872, together with many valuable sketches and letters of the artist.

John Singleton Copley died in 1815, full of years and of honors, and was buried in Croydon church, near London; leaving, as a monument in America, two hundred and sixty-nine oil paintings, thirty-five crayons, and fourteen miniatures, that are known, and perhaps many more. Thus, in a certain way, these persons, who were many of them friends, almost all acquaintances, will be reunited in a contemplated list of these pictures, now in preparation, to be published hereafter. Portraits of husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, many of whom have been parted for nearly a hundred years, will be brought together in close companionship.

There being none extant containing more than thirty pictures, the desire has often been expressed during the last few years that a list of Copley's works should be made. The author of this sketch, being connected with the family by marriage, was thought by certain members of our Societies to be best fitted for the work, — which was commenced more than five years since, and has been prosecuted with the most diligent inquiry and voluminous correspondence.

Copley, it is said, had a partial list of his works; but Miss Copley assured this writer that, although diligent search had been made for it, not only by her brother, but by the family, the list could never be found.

In conclusion this writer begs to offer his acknowledgments and thanks for the valuable assistance rendered to him by Mr. W. H. Whitmore, Mr. J. W. Dean, Miss Elder, Mr. Drake, Mr. Colburn, and Mr. W. S. Appleton.

A. T. P.

338